

BOOK 1 OF THE DRIFTERS' SAGA

Graves FOR Drifters AND Thieves

SOPHIA MINETOS

Copyright © Sophia Minetos 2020

Book 1 of the Drifters' Saga

All rights reserved. No part or whole of this publication may be sold, transmitted, reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system without explicit permission from the author.

This novel is a work of fiction. All characters, names, places, and incidents are used fictitiously or are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, or incidents is purely coincidental.

Cover by Franziska Haase, www.coverdungeon.com.

Edited by Josiah Davis.

ISBN: 978-1-7355933-0-2 (paperback)

IBSN: 978-1-7355933-1-9 (hardback)

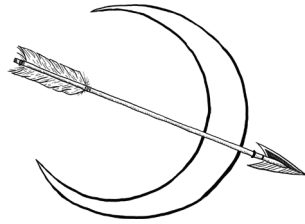
ISBN: 978-1-7355933-2-6 (epub ebook)

IBSN: 978-1-7355933-3-3 (mobi ebook)

www.sophiaminetos.com

For Mom and Dad





Prologue

Summer was over. With the mountains behind them, the Oldridges began their ride to the Mesca territory. There, they'd sell the pelts Pa had snared over the summer, then wait out the northern winter in the desert haze. Jae rode behind her father, whose gaze flicked between his compass and the surrounding pines. Their horses trotted steadily, the dust clouding around their legs.

A chill crept across Jae's neck. She tugged her patched-up jacket around her shoulders. "How much farther?"

"Six miles or so, I reckon," Pa answered. The sun was below the treetops now. "We'll eat supper, then stop somewhere for the night. It ain't wise to ride in the dark."

The woods had grown foggy with the setting sun. Jae shuddered, squinting at the winding trail before them. It was as loopy as a diamondback's tracks. The trees' branches knit together in a knotted canopy and shrouded the road in shadow.

"It's a shame our usual route flooded," Jae said.

"Ain't that the truth," Pa said with a snort. "I've been on this

trail before, though. It's a tad crooked, but it'll get us where we need to go."

Pa studied the road carefully, which made his face lengthen an inch or two. People always told Jae she looked like her father, but she wasn't so sure that was true. Pa wore buckskins and furs like a proper mountain man. He sported a shaggy goatee, and his brown hair was even shaggier. It was long enough to mostly hide the puckered scar on his neck—the remnant of a wound from a grizzly's claw. His brown eyes were steady, never straying from what lay ahead.

Jae's own blue eyes were prone to wandering. Often, she reckoned that she looked too small for the world around her, with her baggy clothes sagging from her thin limbs, her hat sitting crookedly on her head no matter how many times she pushed it back in place. Pa's years had hardened him, and she always felt awfully delicate by his side.

Soon, a clearing opened up on the east side of the trail. The patch of grass was small, about half the size of their cabin. Wildflowers decked the ground, surrendering their colors to the cooling air, wilted and tired. The trail cut through a steady incline, and the ground sloped steadily on either side.

Pa gestured for Jae to dismount. She hopped to the ground, then he passed her a flask of lukewarm tea. She sipped the strong, earthy liquid as Pa counted their bales of furs for the thousandth time. Beaver, marten, nutria.

"We should sell the furs in Kalstira one of these years," Jae said. "We could see the ocean. And those redwood trees you told me about."

Pa replied without looking up from his furs. "I don't think there's a market for furs in Kalstira. People don't need beaver hats down there. Too balmy."

Jae rubbed a bit of warmth back into her stiff fingers. "Must

be nice.”

Pa’s laugh was soft. “I’ll take you there, one day. But if you’re anything like me, you’ll always prefer the woods to the sea.”

Maybe that was true, but the difference between the woods and the sea was that she’d never *seen* the latter. Jae leaned against a ponderosa tree, smiling into the darkening woods, at all she could not see. “I swear, when I’m a Ranger, I’m going to ride from coast to coast. I’ll see every bit of the Outlands.” Apart from Banderra, Mesca, and the road between them, there was little in this world that she’d actually seen.

Pa jostled the pelts back into place. “I hate to break it to you, Jae, but the Rangers don’t have much of a say in where they go. Most of the time, your captain will assign you a case and you’ll go from there.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Is that why you left them? To go exploring by yourself?” She’d heard droves of stories from his days as a Ranger, but she never grew tired of them. One day, she hoped to have stories of her own.

Pa chuckled. “Nah. Well, maybe a little.” He gazed off into the distance. “Ten years in the depths of the Outlands. I came back much crazier.”

“Because of the things you saw?”

“That, and because I had a daughter.”

“*Hey.*”

“Sorry, sweetheart.” His dark eyes brightened. “Couldn’t resist.”

“Still,” she said. “I want to see it all. The wilds. Sometimes I can almost feel them calling me. Like they’re whispering my name.”

Pa laughed again, then took a step away from his stallion. “You’ve got enough spark in you to light a wildfire. I wish I had that much spirit left in me.”

“*I* think you do,” she said. Grinning, she lifted her chin. “Do you miss it? Being a Ranger?”

“Sometimes. I was a wild one when I was younger. It’s a painful thing to be too careful. But being reckless ain’t any better.” He smiled. “Besides, I’ve got everything I need right here, and fewer worries than I did when I was young. It’s a simple life.”

Jae did not want a simple life. She wanted to hurry down a long, winding trail and leave a string of tales behind her.

“You ready to go?” asked Pa.

“Just about.” Jae straightened her hat, and began walking back to her mare.

Before Jae could saddle up, her horse trotted forward, then stopped at the eaves of the forest. She pawed at the ground, tapping her hoof as if she was trying to stamp out a fire.

“Whoa, girl.” Jae stroked her mare’s neck. “Easy. We’ll rest soon.”

“Yep.” Pa adjusted his stallion’s reins. “It’s getting mighty chilly out here. Before long we’ll have to...”

His voice trailed off.

Jae’s lips parted. “Pa?”

He raised a hand to quiet her. His face turned blank as he stepped away from the horse. He ran toward a mound of brambles, then dove arms-first into the gnarled branches and pushed them apart to clear a window into the mist-veiled woods.

Jae stepped in Pa’s direction, hoping to glance over his shoulder. A cold gust sliced through the air like a bullet. The sharp wind stung her eyes and gripped at her face and neck. Her fingers went numb.

Something rumbled across the earth, like rain splattering on rock. The air chilled her throat as she opened her mouth, but no sound came from her lips.

A voice drifted over the air. “*Oldridge.*”

At first, she thought she’d imagined it. Then, her father leaped away from the bushes and ran like he’d just glimpsed hellfire. His hands seized her waist and swept her off the ground.

She squirmed and began to protest, but he shut her up right away. "Jae. Quiet. Not a word."

Pa hurried into the trees, weaving around upright trunks and fallen logs. He brought Jae to a circle of pines and tucked her into the shadows. Her feet stumbled over the roots, trying not to fall. "What's happening?" she asked, biting back tears. There was a flame in Pa's eyes that she'd never seen before.

Pa swallowed, then placed his compass in her hand, the metal cold against her palm. There was a sad, kind look on his face. "Stay here. I'll be right back." It did not sound like a promise. He slipped away.

Jae dared to move a little and found a gap to peer through. Pine needles grazed her chin. The fog and branches obscured her line of sight, but she could make out Pa's figure at the clearing's edge. Somewhere deeper in the woods, a few horses snorted. Then came a faint, raspy laugh.

"You've come back." The words hung in the fog.

Pa trembled but did not run. He waited. The silence was unbearable. Just as Jae was about to dash down the hill and join him, two-dozen faces emerged from the fog before him.

The riders surfaced from the trail's western border, passing through the trees as if they were made of steam. They wore buttoned uniforms as soldiers did, but their clothes were stained and glassy, like soiled hailstones. Fog circled the bluish bodies of the men and their horses. There was no warmth in their faces, and their eyes were too wide, like someone had ripped their lids clean off. Their mouths were cracked and smeared with what Jae could only guess was blood. They moved like feathers on the wind, their bodies wispy as smoke.

Ghosts.

Terror bolted Jae to the ground.

The spirits halted near the trail's edge, leaving only a short stretch

of earth between Pa and themselves. The ghost heading the riders spoke. "*We've been looking for you, Ven. We smell your blood. Twice over.*" Jae could make out his brittle hair, his lined face, the sneer that he'd carried with him into death.

Pa reached for his gun. "Don't you *dare* touch my daughter."

Then came the thunder. The horde charged forth. Pa wavered, shouted, then disappeared in the army of ghosts. Jae swore she heard him crying her name, but the hoof beats smothered the sound.

A rush of icy fear tore through her.

Jae screamed as she tumbled to the ground, thrown over by a burst of wind. Her hands flailed against the earth, and the dirt stung her eyes, clouding her sight.

Over the pounding hooves, her father cried out again. Sputtering, she tried to get up, but something held her down. Whether it was the cold or fear, Jae did not know. Were they passing ahead of her, or fleeing west? The pounding hooves seemed to sound from all around her.

A final cry escaped the chaos, and it was not from Pa. It was faint, but Jae made out the word. "*Outlands.*"

Jae tried to push herself up. Everything, save for her trembling hands, had frozen still. Silently, she begged the Wandering God to let her move again, but she could only lie there helplessly.

At last, the hoof beats disappeared. Just as she began to wonder whether she was going to die on the forest floor, warmth found its way back into her bones. She pushed herself up, gasping and coughing, soil tumbling from her clothes. Her eyes burned.

Jae summoned the strength to whisper. "Pa?" Her knees knocked together as she stood, and the shout burned her throat. "*Pa!*"

There was no answer besides the echo off the pines.

Jae wanted to break, then—to sink to her knees and crumple to the ground. But those ghosts wouldn't wait for her.

Damn it. Which direction had they gone? She searched. She ran forward, and when she came to a wide, sunken gorge, she went backward. The mist weighed down on her like a slab of stone.

Jae wandered through the trees, climbing over boulders, exposed roots, and long-dead logs. Except for the twigs cracking under her boots, the woods were quiet as death. Pain scraped at her muscles, but she urged herself to keep moving, to search until she glimpsed those restless souls again.

Every now and again, she shouted for Pa. The forest mocked her with its silence.

Soon, she found her mare in a frenzy by the river, but Pa's poor stallion was nowhere in sight.

"Oh, sweet girl, I'm here," she cried, clinging to her horse's reins.

Her mare's hooves brought up the river's mud, and it splattered Jae's boots. Jae nuzzled her horse's neck, whispering, trying to keep her voice straight. "Come on, I need ya. We gotta find Pa."

When the horse quit crying and stomping, Jae swung herself onto the saddle and rode away from the trail.

There was no time to stand around and let pity put shackles on her ankles. If those ghosts were nearby, then they didn't deserve a moment of ease. She'd already let fear chain her to the ground once tonight, and she wouldn't disgrace Pa by waiting another second.

She went east. Then west. She roamed until the fog disappeared and the forest once again looked green and fresh. When she reckoned she'd go mad if she kept trudging through the pines, she headed back to the road.

Jae did not speak again until the next day when she reached Fort Sheridan. The sun was fading in the west. The log fort rested on a flat plain, its sharp posts stretching toward the rosy sky. The ruts from wagon wheels formed a straight path toward its entrance.

A tall, mustached fella spied her riding his way. She was still

shaking like a madwoman, and her eyes itched with exhaustion.

The man hurried up to her, his boots leaving faint prints in the loose earth. “Miss, are you alright?”

“I need to speak to the captain.”

Without another word, he took her to the fort. As the structure came closer, Jae could make out the smudges on its windows, the woodpile resting beneath its awning, a stack of barrels banded with steel.

She felt like she was sinking.

The mustached man led Jae’s mare to the stalls, then helped Jae inside. Fort Sheridan’s captain was a man called Berion Drake. Captain Drake had fine, straw-colored hair and sunburned cheeks. His blue eyes were kind, but he couldn’t coax a word out of Jae while she washed up and sat down in his office.

Jae stroked the arms of the chair he’d offered her. Plush leather, cracked and worn. “Thank you.” Her voice was small. She felt like grit covered everything—her clothes and tongue and heart.

“Pleasure,” he said softly. “How old are you, miss?”

“Fifteen in November.”

“Nearly fifteen. Alright. Your name?”

She watched the twilight streaming in through the window and the dust dancing in its path. “Jae Oldridge. I’m Ven Oldridge’s daughter.”

“*The* Ven Oldridge?”

“Mhmm.” She swallowed. “They took him. He’s gone.”

“*Who* took him?”

And she told him. Every bit of it.

Captain Drake did not have much to say. “Ghost riders, you say?”

She nodded.

He drew in a long, deep breath. “I’m not sure what we can do, miss. Ghosts are something that we don’t fully understand. If they’ve

taken him, then—”

“You *have* to,” she interrupted. “He’s a Ranger. I mean, he used to be one, at least. There must be *someone* you can send after him.”

Drake only stared.

Jae’s lip quivered. She regretted snapping at him like that. “I’m sorry. Please. I don’t know much about ghosts either. But... they sounded like they wanted *him*. If they wanted him dead, they would’ve just killed him on the trail. They took him instead. Pa can’t be dead. He’s got to be out there.”

Berion Drake was a good man. She knew this because he didn’t tell her what he must’ve been thinking. *It’s not possible.*

“Please,” she said. Her throat was getting tighter. “I heard them shouting. They said they were gonna take him to the Outlands.”

Jae thought back to Pa’s stories. Many times, he’d said that he’d pissed off a few bastards in his day, but he’d never mentioned their names. Who would hate him enough to come back from the grave?

“Miss,” the captain said, “I’m sorry that this happened to you. We’ll do what we can. I’ll write to the Rangers in the Outlands. They’re more familiar with this sort of thing, but I’m afraid I can’t guarantee that there’s anything they can do.”

Jae counted the planks in the floor. She wondered how many folks had sat in this chair before, begging for an answer. Desperate pleas from desperate people like her. She couldn’t bring herself to meet the captain’s gaze. “I can help. I’ll help them search for him. There might even be something in our cabin we can use. I’ll—”

“Miss,” he said again. “We’ll do what we can.”

Their conversation ended there. He offered her an empty room with a small cot, promising that he’d send word to the Rangers the next morning.

Jae wondered how long it would take the message to reach the Outlands. A few weeks, if they were lucky, but the snows would

come before long.

Jae lay down with the setting sun. The calico sheets were soft against her bare legs. Outside, the wind sang, but panic stirred in her chest. When she closed her eyes, she saw Pa lying on his side, the ghosts circling around him.

What was she doing here?

She crept across the floor, then pressed her forehead to the window and stared at the night-kissed plain. Jae gazed at the silver crags of the Cannoc Mountains and the boundless sky. The peaks were high enough for the moon to hear their whispers, if they could speak. Starlight danced on the world below. Her legs ached, begging her to move toward those mountains.

And she would. Just not yet.

Beyond the mountains were the Outlands. Those ghosts were out there somewhere, and they had Pa. Where would they take him? Across the Outlands' sprawling taigas? North to its frozen tundra? The lakes? The sea?

She stood there for what felt like eons.

A tear slid down her cheek. She reached into her pocket and removed its contents with a fisted hand. Slowly, she unfurled her fingers and showed the object to the sky.

Pa's compass.

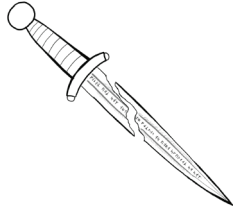
She flicked it open. Its needle swayed, then settled in the direction of the mountains. North. Toward the Outlands. Wordlessly, she asked the stars for help.

Etched on the back of the compass was the Rangers' sigil: an arrow laid across the crescent moon. The mark of Hemaera, the half-goddess who had roamed the Outlands herself, charted them, and presented the map to the first Rangers. Some of them, like Pa, still believed that. To others, Hemaera was a symbol. A myth.

But myth or not, Jae called upon Hemaera's spirit then, for

courage and guidance.

Jae put the compass back in her pocket, and there, she vowed;
“I’m comin’, Pa. I’ll give this back when I see you again.”



Chapter 1

The desert was not quite silent. A breeze drifted across the earth, rustling the dry, brittle grass. In the distance, the rust-red mesas touched the sky, bordered by miles of yuccas and scruffy shrubs. On the horizon lay a massive rock shaped like a fist, its knuckles brushing the full white clouds.

Murrieta's Rock. That meant Ameda was not far.

Jae Oldridge dismounted and draped her horse's reins over the branch of a mesquite tree. The gray mare blew a breath from her nostrils, then stretched out her neck and sniffed the air. Jae pressed her back to the mesquite's trunk, taking in the small patch of shade. March in Mesca often felt like winter at night and summer during the day, and the morning was already warm.

Jae reached into her knapsack. Her hand pinched a thick wad of folded paper. Her map. It was the second most valuable thing she owned, after Pa's compass. Touched by magic itself, it was. A strange gift from an even stranger person.

Jae's gaze flicked to the glimmering gold speck on her map.

Ameda's name, scrawled in brown ink, lingered a few whispers of space above the gold spot. As she traveled, the map moved with her. It showed her a radius of about twenty miles around wherever she was, but she could ask it to show her greater things—entire land-masses, or smaller places, like the streets of a city.

It couldn't show her anything tinier than a village, or anywhere without a name, of course. The map also only worked for places. She'd tried asking it to show her the whereabouts of men on the run before, to no avail.

Jae folded the map back up and put it away, then mounted her horse and headed north on the road.

Two days earlier, some cowboys in Carth had told her that a rustler called Thaddeus Glory had stolen their horses and fled north that morning. The cowboys had heard Glory gloating about his plan to swindle some horses from Ameda next. A man on the run would have few options in this part of the desert. Glory could take Murrieta's Road. Or follow the curves of the Pedora River. The men in Carth had sworn they'd seen him take the road.

Jae had snagged a copy of the warrant from Carth's sheriff. Glory's bounty was set at thirty crowns. That would buy her food for several weeks.

Jae frowned, squinting at the road for the hundredth time. Last night, winds had turned the sands, sweeping any tracks from the trail. Nerves prickled at her stomach. When she found Glory, would he threaten her, or shoot right away? With outlaws, it was often hard to say.

But scary as they could be, nothing scared her more than the thought of never seeing Pa again. Her folder of successful bounties grew fatter every few months. And she'd catch a thousand robbers, killers, and rogues if that was what it took.

It'd been more than two years since he'd gone. Somehow, it felt

closer to ten. On long rides, when there was little to do but think to herself... Jae longed to feel like a child again, to laugh, to revel in stories, to sleep without fearing the ghosts that rode across her dreams. But such hopes were for folks without work to be done, and they were luxuries she no longer had.

She loved this land, but did not have a lick of respect for thieves. The west was beautiful, glorious... and to many, it was *new*. The folks on this side of the country were hearty people. They had to be. Many were honest. Others saw it as a climate where their wretched deeds could go unpunished. The land deserved protection from the rotten folk who flocked to it, believing they could prosper by shedding blood and feeding their greed. And if staving them off helped her get closer to Pa, all the better.

Her horse whinnied. Jae's fingers loosened on the reins. Murietta's Rock looked to be about four miles away. The Pedora flowed nearby as well. That was good. She needed more water.

The sun climbed toward the sky's center, and Jae rode until the road sloped down into a valley. Cottonwoods sprawled alongside the river, casting wide sweeps of shade. Folks often joked that the Pedora River was little more than a muddy ribbon cutting through the desert. Northerners had the real rivers, but in the desert, water was water.

Jae followed the river's curves, listening to the current pouring through the valley. The trail wound through the cottonwoods, then opened into a flat stretch of hard-packed land. Beyond the flat earth lay Ameda.

Like most desert towns, Ameda was small and boxy, its structures baked weak and pale by the sun. Wooden buildings with flat rooftops bordered a wide, arrow-straight road. The main street was unpaved, and save for the cacti growing by the storefronts, empty.

Jae stopped outside the town's church. The white, adobe walls

were cracked, and the church's doors were carved from planks of oak. A bell glinted in the open window of the building's tower. A crow waited on its awning, flicking its head and croaking.

Jae dismounted. She hitched up her mare and triple knotted the reins for good measure. Jae glanced over her shoulder, then removed the pot from her saddlebag and unscrewed the lid.

Hackwort tar. Clearer than honey and ten times as sticky.

She heaped it onto the reins. Jae drew her knife, then used the edge to smear the liquid over the leather, careful to leave a bare spot near the bridle.

She was ready.

"Good girl," Jae whispered. She took the rope out of her saddlebag—two loops tied just wide enough for a pair of wrists and ankles—and tucked them under her shirt.

Jae peeked inside the church, scanning the area for parishioners. Empty. She slipped inside and shut the door behind her.

The church of the Wandering God always welcomed travelers. Jae had spent many nights in their storerooms and lofts. They rarely asked for anything in return, but Jae always left them a couple of deons, or food if there was no money to spare.

Jae's boots clicked on the floor. At the head of the altar was a carved walking stick: the symbol of the Wandering God. The holy books said that he had walked through the skies, and worlds sprouted from the seeds he sowed across the stars. Below, in frames of copper, were the sigils for the lesser gods of this world, whom the Wandering God had appointed at the dawn of the earth. A sun for Cressien, a mountain for Petreos, a river for Nerea. Jae eyed the pine tree representing Argun, the god of forests and travelers. Her father had always favored him, so she sent Argun a silent little prayer.

Her requests were simple: *Please help me catch Glory, and help me get away.*

Beside the altar was a narrow stairway. Jae hurried upstairs to the bell tower. The space was empty, except for the bell's rope hanging from the angled ceiling. A window cast a square of sunlight on the floor. There was no pane within its frame, letting the morning air stream into the room.

Jae hurried to the window. The ledge rose to meet her chest, giving her plenty of room to scout out the area.

Up here, she could see the whole town clearly, right down to the signs mounted over the shops' doors. She took the spyglass from her pocket. Pressing it softly to her brow, she gazed at the road, and waited.

Her fingers drummed on the ledge and grazed the rough bumps in the stucco. Somehow, the streets looked even emptier now.

In the past two years, Jae had learned a lot about thieves. They didn't carry themselves like common folk. They either acted like they had too much to do, or too little. Sometimes they'd go out of their way to blend in with the cowboys around them. Other times, they just stuck out like sore thumbs garbed in fine leathers and fringe.

The cowboys in Carth had said that Glory liked to steal horses in broad daylight, loudly threatening to shoot anyone who crossed him. Given that, along with a nickname like "Glory," Jae guessed he'd be the sore thumb kind of thief.

She waited. Her neck grew sore, and she was itching with sweat beneath her clothing. The breeze batted at her face, tossing stray hairs around her forehead.

She backed out of the wind, but just before she turned to head back inside, she spied a wiry figure riding into town, holding himself upright like a warlord, and her gut told her that her target was here.

Jae left her twin revolvers in a corner, keeping her knife and her smallest pistol hidden in her boots. She never approached a target without a weapon or two, but they didn't need to know that. It was

better to let them think she was unarmed.

In a flash, she was downstairs.

Jae snuck out of the church's back door, careful not to let it slam behind her, then hurried to the street's edge. She wiped her palms on her pants, poked her head out just far enough to watch, and held still.

Two cowboys—one leading a strong brown workhorse—stood chatting on the roadside. Beside them, the rider came to a stop. His horse was a beauty with a glossy black coat. He reached for his gun, and lined the barrel up with the cowboys' eyes. As he cocked the pistol, his demand boomed across the hard-packed dirt.

“Give me the horse.”

Glory indeed.

Jae couldn't make out what the cowboys said. One threw up his hands right away, but the other dared to talk back. Even from a hundred feet away, Jae knew a sharp tongue when she heard it.

Glory fired. Dust rose from the ground, but the man did not fall. Must've been a warning shot. Trembling, the sharp-tongued cowboy took a few steps back.

Glory took the brown steed's reins and bound them to his own horse.

“Don't talk to me like that again, boys,” Glory called as he rode away. “Or I'll take more than the damn horse.”

He was closer now. Jae cast a glance at her own horse, then crept out of the alley and sat on the steps of the church.

Slouching to make herself look small, she pretended to fiddle absentmindedly with the hem of her shirt. Her eyes wandered until the horse thief stopped in front of her. Glory's gaze met her own.

The rustler snickered. Gods. Why did they always laugh at her?

She held onto his gaze. His eyes were a dull, burnished brown, like a rusty old knife. Scratches covered his face, red and ripe beneath his whiskers. “This your horse?”

She let herself shiver before him. “Yes, sir,” she croaked in a small, grating voice. She rolled one of her braids across her fingers. “Can I help you?”

“You sure can.” He dismounted and brought out the gun. “I’d like your mare, if you don’t mind.”

Jae nodded, whimpering like wounded prey. “Y-yes. Go right ahead.”

He looked the horse up and down. “Not a beauty, but she’ll do.”

Hmph. Thieves or not, she hated people who made a show out of being rude.

Thaddeus Glory holstered his gun, then braced himself to tether Jae’s mare to the chestnut horse. He took up the mare’s reins with both hands.

But he did not step away. Fingers tight around the leather, his eyes narrowed on the bridle. He jerked his arm, slowly at first, then frantically. The mare whinnied as the rustler flapped his elbows about. Glory did not see Jae retrieve the rock from the ground.

“Is this *tar*?” he shouted.

Despite the nerves twisting in her stomach, Jae couldn’t resist a reply. “Yep.” She brought the rock down on his head.

Glory’s knees buckled. With a startled cry, he fell to the ground. Jae drove her heel between his shoulders, then whipped out her boot pistol and clicked it right by his ear. She kept her voice firm and level. “Not a word out of you. Don’t move.”

A low moan came out of Glory’s mouth. He could hardly even move as she slipped his wrists and ankles through the loops of rope and pulled them tight. In her periphery, she could see the two cowboys from the street approaching them.

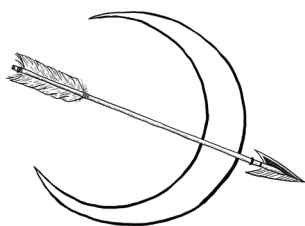
Glory finally squirmed a little as she yanked on the rope binding his ankles. She planted her heel on the small of his back again. “I told ya, don’t move!”

He shuddered a moment, then settled. The cowboys eyed both of them, not moving much.

“Hey,” Jae said. She pointed to the workhorse, who was still hitched to Glory’s black steed. “Don’t worry, I’ve got him. Your horse is fine.”

One of the cowboys stepped toward her, his brown eyes brimming with confusion. “Ma’am? What did you do?”

“Hit him with a rock.” She cleared her throat. “You folks got a sheriff?”



Chapter 2

Sheriff Arlington was asleep when they entered his office, resting his head on his forearms, his body slouching in his desk chair. Jae and the cowboys carried Glory, still tied up like firewood, between them. The daze of being whacked must've faded somewhat, because now, he was writhing like a beetle on its back, probably chafing his wrists raw.

Sunlight leaked in through the window's dusty blinds. At the back of the room was a set of two cells, barred with iron and barren, save for two shoddy cots and stray bits of hay. The sheriff murmured as the door slammed shut. He rubbed his eyes, fetched a beat-up hat from the side of his desk, then got to his feet and trudged to the doorway. "What's goin' on, folks?"

Jae grunted, struggling to haul Glory along the wooden floor. "Caught ourselves a rustler. Thaddeus Glory."

The sheriff blinked. "That horse thief from down south?"

"Sure is," said one of the cowboys.

The sheriff grabbed a pair of cuffs from a hook the wall. "Set

him down.”

They did as they were told, and Glory started thrashing as soon as they released his limbs. The sheriff placed his boot on the thief’s back, cuffed Glory’s wrists, then slipped off the two loops of rope. As he brought Glory to his feet, the sheriff tried to pass the rope to the cowboys.

Jae took the rope and slung it loosely over her arm. The sheriff gave her a sour look, but said nothing.

Glory didn’t so much as glance at the three men. Instead, he kept his glare aimed at Jae the whole time. When the sheriff yanked the cloth from Glory’s mouth, the thief said, “Gotta say. I thought that if I ever wound up gettin’ caught, a lawman would haul me off. Or did the Rangers get desperate enough to haul *you* outta the gutters?”

Jae said nothing. Coarseness from thieves scathed her about as well as lukewarm milk.

“Keep your mouth shut, Glory,” said the sheriff. “Your trial will run a lot more smoothly if you do.” The cell’s iron door shut with a high-pitched creak. The sheriff locked it, then motioned to a log bench before his desk. “Have a seat, y’all.”

Jae lowered herself onto the bench in front of the sheriff’s desk. The seat’s ledge dug into her thighs. Even if the blinds weren’t down, Jae guessed the sheriff’s office would still be dim. The smell of dust and stale paper filled the room. The walls and wooden floor were plain, save for the sea of handbills plastered to the wall. Faces of outlaws, sketched by careful hands above their promised bounties, stared right back at her.

The sheriff plucked a pen from the mess of papers on his desk. He cleared his throat. “Alright. What happened?”

The older of the two cowboys pointed to Jae. He straightened his hat, tucking a few strands of silver-black hair under the brim. “This young lady bound him up. We just helped her haul him off.”

Sheriff Arlington coughed. "Either of you get hurt?"

"Nah," said the cowboy. "He just took a shot at the ground, then stole my horse. Got the horses back after this gal took care of Glory."

The sheriff scribbled down the report. "Can I get your names, gentlemen?"

"Juan Silva," said the graying cowboy.

"Breck Barlon," answered the other, scratching his neck.

The shape of Jae's name formed on her tongue, but the sheriff cut her off. "That'll be all from you, gentlemen." Arlington sipped his coffee, then pointed at Jae with his pen. "You stay."

The men tipped their hats. Juan gave Jae a polite smile, then left at his companion's side.

"Thanks for the help," she said as they headed outside. When they were gone, she turned back to the sheriff, leaning forward in her seat. She itched to collect the bounty, for the coins to fall into her hands.

"What's your name, miss?" asked Arlington.

"Jae Oldridge."

"How'd you happen to come by this rustler?"

"Tracked him for a few days."

Clicking his tongue, the sheriff set down his pen. "And who taught you how to do that?"

Jae took the knapsack off her shoulders, then pulled out the folder holding her records. "I'm sorry to be curt, sir, but I have other business to take care of. I need to leave soon. If I could get my bounty and a receipt for it, that'd be swell."

"Settle down. You ain't going anywhere until you tell me how you caught this fella."

Jae suppressed a sigh, wondering how long it would be until she could get her coins and hurry out the door. She explained the events

of the morning to him.

The sheriff looked at her like she'd just asked him to teach her how to breathe. "Tar?"

"Tar," she said.

The sheriff clasped his hands and leaned on his forearms. "What business has a young lady got chasing horse thieves through the desert?"

"Why is my profession any concern of yours?" she asked. "If the job gets done, it gets done."

The sheriff snorted, a hefty wheeze coming out of his nostrils. "Profession?" Before Jae could shift back, his plump hand reached out to seize her folder. "Let me see this."

If it weren't for her pending payment, she would have yanked it back and hurried outside, but she let him open it. She watched the sheriff leaf through the receipts, warrants, and records with wide eyes.

"Hang on here. You passed yourself off as a landlord's daughter, then lured two bandits into a locked room at a boarding house?"

"Yes."

The sheriff thumbed the next page. "And you traveled with the Brenner gang for a few days before you drugged their water supply, bound their hands and... got the sheriff before they woke?"

She folded her hands. "Yes."

Sheriff Arlington flipped over the third report. "And you caught the... Clarence twins? Freed their horses and broke their wagon wheels?"

"Yes," she said, tapping her fingers on the bench. The wooden legs creaked as she adjusted her position. She wasn't keen on being here all afternoon.

The sheriff fingered the records again. "Are these real?"

"Of course." Why on earth would she have wasted time forging

them? Besides, she had no money to throw away on *paper*, of all things.

“So. You’re a bounty hunter?”

“I am.” The phrase itself didn’t bother her. What bothered her was the way most men said it, like they were forcing the words out of their stomachs.

“You know, miss, this ain’t a game. Most bounty hunters don’t last long. The only ones the job don’t kill are the ones with enough sense to walk away.”

Jae shrugged. “I’m still alive.”

Solemnly, Arlington squinted. “For now. You know, vigilantism ain’t legal out east.”

Jae laughed. “That’s because they don’t *need* it there. Why do you think all the thieves come out west?”

The sheriff’s gaze was tired and heavy.

“Same reason the settlers do,” Jae finished. “Opportunity.”

“Lawmen are coming with those settlers,” the sheriff replied, his voice laced with scorn. “*Real* lawmen. Not rogue bounty hunters and children who want to play at being gunslingers. How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty,” she said quickly. She was seventeen now, but her age wasn’t his damn business and she didn’t mind lying if it would cut this conversation short.

“You wanna know the truth about bounty hunters? Most of them don’t give a damn about justice. They just like the thrill of it, and the pay that comes with it. I don’t respect most of ‘em.”

She took no offense. “I don’t care about the thrill. I make enough to get by. But for now, it’s a necessary job.”

The sheriff gave her a thoughtful stare. “Why?”

“I’m gonna be a Ranger.”

The ghosts were in the Outlands. Common folk couldn’t get to the Outlands. And there was only one safe way in. Hemaera’s

Pass—wide and flat and swarming with the Rangers' watchmen. If you weren't a Ranger, then you didn't make it through.

The sheriff answered with another wheezy laugh. "In that case, best of luck."

Tempted as she was to snap, she answered him as delicately as she could. "Much obliged." Men turned to buzzards if they sensed a speck of desperation in her. They liked trying to pick her clean of her words like meat from a bone.

Jae felt that she'd sat through this conversation many times before, though she supposed she shouldn't have been surprised. There were nearly three hundred Rangers in Hespيريا. Only twenty-one were women, and every single one of those women started as a bounty hunter. Jae had tried using her first bounty to pay three Rangers to search the Outlands on their own. When she told them that she didn't know where Pa was exactly, they'd all backed off. One had even laughed.

There was no shortage of danger in the Outlands—harsh weather, beasts and monsters, strange happenstances of every kind. Then there were the Nefilium—the hidden-folk, with magic pulsing through their veins. The Rangers guarding Hemaera's Pass were not lenient about letting common people through.

The breeze whistled through the crack of the doorway. The sheriff blew a puff of air from his lips. "Want some free advice?"

"Sure," said Jae, though the phrase in question struck her as odd. Who was out there charging money for advice?

"Settle down," the sheriff said. "There are plenty of suitable jobs for a woman your age. Jobs that have pride in them. Jobs where you won't end up with a bullet in your gut."

She tried to smother her agitation, but her reply still came out sounding flat. "Thank you for your suggestions. I'll certainly consider them." A suitable job wouldn't help her become a Ranger or

get her to the Outlands.

The sheriff snorted. “Don’t turn your nose up. I’m trying to help you out.”

She didn’t need his help. She brushed the old papers back into her folder, closed it, and stashed it in her bag. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to collect my bounty and be on my way. I’m sure you’ve got a busy day ahead of you.”

“Yeah, I’m busy today.” The sheriff scribbled down a few more notes, then opened a drawer full of bronze crowns, silver deons, and copper pennies. “I’m leaving for Calora on business this afternoon.”

Jae shifted to the side. She looked down at her boots, trying to ignore the feeling of splinters prickling under her pants. The shadow of the desk was a graveyard for moths and flies. Finally, Sheriff Arlington slid her the coins. Jae counted them twice. Twenty crowns. “Sir.”

“What?”

“You underpaid me.” She pulled the warrant from her pocket. “Glory’s bounty was set at thirty crowns.”

The sheriff glanced at the scrap of paper. “Where’d you get that from?”

“Carth.”

He sniffed. “Then ya should’ve caught Glory in Carth.”

Jae traced the price with her fingertip. “Same county, so I should receive the same bounty. It’s—”

The sheriff stood, thrusting his chair behind him. He shoved a finger an inch in front of Jae’s face. “You watch your mouth and take what you’ve earned. Frankly, there are men in my position who wouldn’t be half as generous.”

Glory laughed from inside his cell.

Though she felt like it would kill her, Jae held her tongue. She figured Arlington was the sort of man who would yank the coins

right back if she didn't take what he'd given her. But as she scraped them into her satchel, blood burning with frustration, she hoped she'd never have to return to Ameda.

She tipped her hat, pushed her chair back, and stood. "Have a good day, sir. I hope you don't run into any trouble on your way to Calora."

She didn't look back at the sheriff, or Glory for that matter.